

Lakefront park has new, costly hurdle

Replacing the seawall around DuSable Park, which was dedicated nearly 20 years ago, will cost \$6 million

By Charles Sheehan
Tribune staff reporter

A new engineering study suggests that a lot more work and money may be needed to transform one of the city's last undeveloped stretches of lakefront into the waterside gem it was envisioned to be nearly two decades ago.

Mayor Harold Washington first dedicated the land at the mouth of the Chicago River as DuSable Park in 1987. Despite being sandwiched today between booming condo developments downtown and bustling Navy Pier, the 3-acre meadow has somehow clung stubbornly to its industrial past.

The recent study, for which divers inspected the park's seawall, found that the revetment

Seawall needs overhaul

The 65-foot-deep seawall that holds DuSable Park together must be replaced at a cost of \$6 million, according to a new study.



Source: Chicago Park District
Chicago Tribune

must be replaced at a cost of about \$6 million, driving the cost of the entire park close to \$12 million.

That is an increase of about 30 percent from a preliminary request for proposals of \$9 million put out in August last year, according to officials with the steering committee for the park.

For park advocates, it's just the latest setback for a piece of



Tribune photo by E. Jason Wambsgans

Replacing the seawall around DuSable Park will drive the park's total cost to about \$12 million, far above the original \$5 million estimate. "Thousands of tourists float by this place on boats every day. It needs to get done," said Bob O'Neill, a member of the park's steering committee.

real estate that they say is an essential link between open land along the lakefront.

As recently as 2002, engineers believed the seawall that holds the manmade landform together could be repaired for about \$2.5 million, according to Bob O'Neill, a member of the steering committee.

There has never been a completion date set for DuSable by the Park District, and it is not

known whether the cost of the seawall or its replacement will set the project back, said Arnold Randall, director of planning and development.

Getting a firm grasp on the cost of the project is the first step toward completion, he said.

"People would like it to be done right away," Randall said. "The discussions I've been part of for the last year and a half

have basically been about what it's going to cost, and we need some additional funding because the reality is, we don't have it fully funded."

With \$1.5 million earmarked by the Park District, \$3 million from the city and a million or so from private sources, only about half the needed funds to complete the park have been

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secured.

Attempts to finish the park have hit snags over the years. Today, DuSable Park remains a throwback to a time when Navy Pier was a lengthy stretch of dank warehouses and Millennium Park was home to a greasy, open-air train yard.

As recently as two years ago, the cost of the entire park, including repairs to the seawall, was believed to be about \$5 million, much less than the new estimates for the seawall alone, said Erma Trantor, executive director of Friends of the Parks.

"We're all disappointed because even the \$5 million was a large price tag," she said. "We are disappointed because we had hoped there would be some ability to move in 2006 to construct the park, and it's already more than a decade behind."

The site lay dormant for years after it was dedicated, even as Navy Pier was transformed into a playground in plain sight of DuSable Park, which today is hemmed in by a chain-link fence and littered with cans, bottles and trash bags.

The project was delayed further after it was found that the land had been polluted in the 1930s by a radioactive byproduct of a lantern plant, one of a number of industrial businesses that dumped filth in the area for about a century.

Cleanup, or more precisely the argument over who would pay for it, set the project back about two years and was completed in 2002.

There are forces converging to make the park happen.

The Art Institute of Chicago has commissioned renowned sculptor Martin Purveyer to begin work on a piece in honor of Jean Baptiste Point DuSable, using \$500,000 from its fund dedicated to public sculpture.

Working designs for the park exist. Developers have pledged hundreds of thousands of dollars to complete the park, an attractive selling point for posh condos.

Park advocates say the park named for DuSable, the first non-Native American settler in

Chicago, is much more important than a marketing tool for condo sales.

There are few places in Chicago with more historical significance and few that are seen more by out-of-towners than DuSable Park, said O'Neill, who is also president of the Grant Park Conservancy.

"This land is hidden in plain view and it's nestled right up to one of the top tourist sites in the world. It's right on the lake, it's right downtown," O'Neill said. "Thousands of tourists float by this place on boats every day. It needs to get done. It's as simple as that."

The Park District is actively pursuing city, state and federal funding, Randall said.

Advocates say there is a silver lining in the recent study in that it brings more attention to an important piece of lakefront, a parcel of scrub brush and trash that most people look beyond for a view of Navy Pier or the marinas.

"A lot of people didn't pay attention to Millennium Park or other places, which began as pamphlets or someone's idea," O'Neill said. "I see this as light at the end of a tunnel. It's been a long tunnel, granted."

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